

On the Motif of Death in Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*

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Abstract

This paper sets out to elaborate the theme of death in Julian Barnes' Man Booker Prize awarded novel *The Sense of an Ending*. The author is convinced that the two suicides respectively of Robson and Adrian, as well as the death of Mrs. Ford, manage to lay bare the profound impacts of the drastic social changes on people of various social classes. The decline of religion and the rise of various schools of thought, the dismantling of the traditional family and the rising self-confidence of the woman, and the serious class clashes all complicate interpersonal communications and result in various tragic endings.

Key words: Death; Suicide; Camus; Class; Damage

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INTRODUCTION

In his non-fictional work *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, Julian Barnes makes "death" his central concern. "Death", the ultimate insoluble question and inevitable end for the human, is at the core of our existence; it is destructive in that it annihilates life, but it is also constructive in that it urges serious contemplations on the meaning and ways of living. Life cannot be lived if thoughts on "death" are suspended. With retrospections on deaths of his family and friends, as well as presentations of their views on this gloomy topic, plus death-related stories and reflections of some eminent cultural figures, Barnes puts this taboo topic

on the "lemon" table, frankly laying bare all his cares and concerns about this unavoidable certainty among all the uncertainties that are called life.

Barnes highlights "religion" as a referential framework in the discussion of "death." The opening sentence — "*I don't believe in God, but I miss Him*" (Barnes, 2008, p.1) — illustrates his religious dilemma. For the "*don't believe*" part, he, as claimed by himself, was "*a happy atheist*" (Barnes, 2008, p.17) as a young man and is an agonist when into much more advanced age (Barnes, 2008, p.22); he traces his family's irreligiousness back to his maternal grandmother who lost her faith as a young woman and later was inexplicably converted to socialism and even communism (Barnes, 2008, p.2), his Grandpa who "*had reduced his religious observance to watching Songs of Praise on television*" (Barnes, 2008, p.3), his mother who, "*as for religion*", "*...told me firmly that she didn't want any of that mumbo-jumbo at her funeral*" (Barnes, 2008, p.5) and who was certain that "*people only believe in religion because they're afraid of death*" (Barnes, 2008, p.8). As for himself, he "*...was happy not to believe in God*", but, "*if I was happy to be free of Old Nobodaddy, I wasn't blithe about the consequences*," because then "*...death, however distant, was on the agenda in quite a different way*." (Barnes, 2008, p.18) What vexes him as an atheist is that without Heaven and afterlife promised by God or the belief in God, "*...the alternative is fucking terrifying*." (Barnes, 2008, p.175) This vexation or fear leads to the "miss" part.

The "*don't believe*" part does not result in his bigotry as to the atheist's priority over the believer.

As twenty-first-century neo-Darwinian materialists, convinced that the meaning and mechanism of life have only been fully clear since the year of 1859, we hold ourselves categorically wiser than those credulous knee-benders who, a speck of time away, believed in divine purpose, and ordered world, resurrection and a Last Judgment. But although we are more informed, we are no more evolved, and certainly no more intelligent than them. (Barnes, 2008, p.22)

For atheists, or serious agnostics (Barnes, 2008, p.24) for that matter, the gift of “*spiritual freedom*” is compromised by “*the religion of despair*” and “*gazing down into the black pit at one’s feet.*” (Barnes, 2008, p.24) Barnes’ “*intermittent nocturnal attacks*” (Barnes, 2008, p.23) from death-fear, his friend G’s thanatophobes’ gold medal (Barnes, 2008, p.24), and Rachmaninov’s case of consuming nuts against the threat of death (Barnes, 2008, p.25) all illustrate the menace of abyssality (not in Spivak’s sense) in the absence of a system ensuring afterlife.

Then, is it for this fear of absolute nothingness that Barnes feels like missing God? In the gloomy matter of death, Montaigne offered “*have(ing) it constantly in mind*” as “*the best form of counter-attack*” (Barnes, 2008, p.41); Cicero “*combined the two traditions into a cherry Antique either/or: ‘After death, either we feel better or we feel nothing’*” (Barnes, 2008, p.43); Jules Renard, Barnes’ “*non-blood relative*” (Barnes, 2008, p.46), though generally questioning the existence of God (Barnes, 2008, p.46) and on that occasion praising the Roman-style suicide of his father (Barnes, 2008, p.50), wavered in his atheist stance at the absurdity of death in the cases of his brother and mother. These three instances have one thing in common: both the ancient and the modern secular mentalities do not look beyond death per se for strategies to cope with death. Barnes addresses this limitation by claiming that “*Missing God is focused on me for missing the underlying sense of purpose and belief when confronted with religious art.*” (Barnes, 2008, p.53) This statement implicitly interprets God as the latent meaning the human being assumes there is to justify his conscious existence against the annihilating force of death. The modern audience tends to miss the profound religious feeling contained in religious art and music; this reveals the superficiality and lack of purpose of the contemporary life. Barnes furthers his argument by quoting Philip Larkin saying that “*we shall still—always—be drawn towards such abandoned site (churches), because ‘someone will forever be surprising/ A hunger in himself to be more serious.’*” (Barnes, 2008, p.57) Then he continues to probe into the meaning of “Missing”:

Is this what underlies the sense of Missing? God is dead, and without Him human being can at last get up off their knees and assume their full heights; and yet this height turns out to be quite dwarfish. (Barnes, 2008, p.57)

Barnes deliberately capitalizes the “m” in “missing”, apparently suggesting that “*Missing*” be the defining characteristic of God in this postmodern world. Even if God is not true, the human can not afford missing Him.

In the absence of God or underlying purpose, various secular attempts have been made at offering guidance for life as counter-attack against death. In his own case, Barnes’s book obsession assumes the status of religion as he says “*we didn’t go to church, but we did go to the*

library.” (Barnes, 2012, p.ix) A good number of famous figures with their reflections of death in a Godless world are presented in *Nothing to Be Frightened*: Montaigne, Renard, Koestler, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Edmund Wilson, Camus, Sartre, Maugham, Daudet, Shostakovich, Wittgenstein, etc.. Though, at the end of the book, no answer is given any credit, and the Missing part is still hanging in the air.

In his fictional works, this unending inquiry into the nature and effects of death in a Godless world has been one of Barnes’ central themes. His second novel *Before She Met Me* revolves around a murder caused by the dark feeling of jealous. “*Staring at the Sun*, his fourth novel, is a narrative in many ways of looking death in the face” (Childe, 2011, p.4). His great literary achievement *Flaubert’s Parrot* unfolds in the shadow of the death of the narrator’s wife. His short story collection titled *Lemon Table*, the symbol of death in China according to Barnes, is solely about the theme of aging and fear of death. His 2011 Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Sense of an Ending* fictionalizes his thoughts on death, especially on suicide. Above that, Barnes makes attempts at explaining the narrated deaths in a wider social and historical context.

1. TWO SUICIDES AND THE FIASCO OF PHILOSOPHIES

Part One of *The Sense of an Ending*, which accounts for one third of the book, is the first person narrator’s retrospection on his life from his school days to his retirement. Though minor in length when compared with Part Two, it contains all the clues to the pivotal personal qualities of the main characters which are combined in certain weird ways to bring about the final tragedy of Adrian’s suicide. A word frequently appears in this part is “memory”, a human cognitive phenomenon constantly contemplated in *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, which has the nature of running water and runs in different and sometimes even opposite courses as the Barnes brothers recall their parents’ dying processes and final deaths. “Memory” and “death” are like twins in that book’s family memoir part. This ally unfailingly appears at the beginning of the novel under study:

I remember, in no particular order:

- a shiny inner wrist;
- steam rising from a wet sink as a hot frying pan is laughingly tossed into it;
- gouts of sperm circling a plughole, before being sluiced down the full length of a tall house;
- a river rushing nonsensically upstream, its wave and wash lit by half a dozen chasing torch beams;
- another river, broad and grey, the direction of its flow disguised by a stiff wind exciting the surface;
- bathwater long gone cold behind a locked door.* (Barnes, 2011, p.3)

The claim of “*in no particular order*” is only true as long as the reader “takes the piss” of the unreliable first person narrator and of Barnes. The listed six memorial fragments stand out only because they are crucial to the identity-building of the narrator as well as to authorial intention of the book. When closely scrutinized, the underlying structure of the pieces will reveal itself; there is one common element: fluidity. The watch worn on the inside of the wrist is an image of fluid in that time is running its own course despite the juvenile desire of personal control over it. This unconventional way of wearing watch is not only a metaphor of character or the pretension of having character which cannot be truer for Tony, but also an irony when it is all readily removed at the request of Veronica, the domineering and manipulating ex-girl friend.

The second and third pieces are, as later revealed, both about the nightmarish weekend at the Ford’s. The former is concerned with the flirtatious manner Sarah Ford had when being alone with Tony at breakfast the first morning of his visit; the “*rising steam*” and the “*wet sink*” are both fluid and together form an aura of voluptuousness as well as suggest some suppressed energy which is hinting at “*great unrest*” (Barnes, 2011, p.163) to come. The latter is about sexual energy released but also implies a revenge in the form of a symbolic sexual violation whose object is the high social class embodied by the tallness of the house. Both pieces suggest the destructiveness of some pent-up forces within certain confinements and between discrepant social strata which have not yet found proper channels of release.

The fourth and fifth fragments are river-related. The former describes young people excitedly chasing the reverse rush of the Severn Bore, indicating the preposterousness of the natural course and the mysteriously bewitching effects it can exert on human beings who are at the root irrational. The latter depicts the same river before the Bore began, posing a contrast with the former to suggest that there would be much more below the surface. Both imply the incomprehensibility and absurdity of fate and human nature which Adrian tries to bring under control by practicing seriousness in terms of living logically and actively.

The last piece is the suicide scene of Adrian imagined by Tony. Adrian dies a Roman death (Barnes, 2011, p.53), and hence “in character” —Barnes repeatedly mentions dying in character in *Nothing to Be Frightened of* as a way to at least retain one’s dignity when reaching the end—because of his own logical argument and the deliberate and considerate arrangement. There in the center of the scene is again water, but long cold and bloody red: qualities as robust as logic and seriousness ending up with lifelessness. This is not only tragic but also gloomily ironic.

These scenes begin with the cocksureness of control over time and end with Adrian’s suicide, suggesting that

the only thing in life controllable is killing oneself with one’s free will. It is therefore safe to claim that the feigned randomness of these memories intentionally indicates the fluidity and stagnation of life and desire, for water/fluidity is the basic element/nature of life, and memory, be it individual or collective, is also fluid in essence, always flowing and changing shapes.

The entire story virtually revolves around the life and death of Adrian even though the narrator’s life stories and self-reflections take up most part of the book. Tony retraces his school days and later his relationship with Veronica, trying to comprehend the mystery of Adrian’s suicide. The unreliability of his limited first person narration is set by Barnes as a lure leading the reader to probe into the mist for the truth. By doing so, Barnes is only doing justice to the great mystery named life.

The first suicide in the novel happens in their school days. Before this sensational event, the narrator’s memories already circled around Adrian, who had been transferred to Tony’s school and soon began to show his maturity in thoughts. First, in a history class, when asked about his view on “*the reign of Henry the Eighth*” (Barnes, 2011, p. 5), he said cleverly “*Not really, sir. But there is one line of thought according to which all you can truly say of any historical event—even the outbreak of the First World War, for example—is that ‘something happened.’*” (Barnes, 2011, p.5) After class when admired by Tony he remarked that it was a pity that the teacher did not argue along with him (Barnes, 2011, p.6). This anecdote shows his ability and readiness to work on ideas. His sensitivity to the matter of love and death is illustrated by his reaction to a poem the literature teacher asked the class to interpret. When Tony’s explanation was trite and mundane, Adrian’s “*Eros and Thanatos, sir*” (Barnes, 2011, p.7) as an answer and his ensuing elaboration not only stand him out against the mediocrity of the rest of the class, but also imply that he is well-versed in the Freudian ideas of erotic principle and death principle, a sure sign of his intellectual pursuit. Besides, this mentioning of love and death also foresees the latent reason of his final death. Interestingly, in his *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, Barnes introduces the reader to an Alex Brilliant who was a Jew “*reading Wittgenstein at sixteen and writing poetry...*” (Barnes, 2008, p.13) Alex “*took a scholarship to Cambridge and later killed himself—with pills, over a woman—in his late twenties.*” (Barnes, 2008, p.13) This precocious young man seems to be the prototype of Adrian Finn; besides, he shared interests with the latter in Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Another evidence showing certain intertextuality is that in both books there is this English master who quotes Eliot’s summary of human life—birth, copulation, and death. (Barnes, 2008, p.17; 2011, p.6) Both examples confirm that Barnes writes this novel to fictionalize his thoughts on death.

The narrator further provided facts revealing the reason of Adrian’s precocity, as well as opening a window

to his personality traits. The conclusion made by Tony and his two friends was that Adrian was a person of seriousness—a word Barnes emphasizes over and again in *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (Barnes, 2008, p.57, 59, 64, 77). “*We were essentially taking the piss, except when we were serious. He was essentially serious, except when he was taking the piss.*” (Barnes, 2011, p.7) Adrian never altered his views to accord with others’. He took the morning prayers seriously; he joined the fencing club and did the high jump; he came to school with his clarinet. (Barnes, 2011, p.8) When the other three practiced cynicism and skepticism in virtual every matter, he assumed a very positive and active attitude toward life and living. His seriousness, when put under the light of his philosophical inclination toward Nietzsche and Camus (Barnes, 2011, p.10), is presumably existentialistic in nature, for “*Meaningful living, for the existentialists, requires to be conceived not in terms of completion or in terms of duration, but rather in terms of an intensification and clarification of life’s possibilities from moment to moment.*” (Gray, 1951, p.122) This philosophical stance was a ready one in the 1960s when existentialism was in its heydays. Even though “*...strictly speaking Camus was not an existentialist*” (Foley, 2008, p.1), he and Sartre shared the same philosophical starting point: the human existence is absurd. “*For Sartre, with whom the idea is perhaps most usually associated, the term ‘absurd’ denoted the contingent nature of human existence.*” (Foley, 2008, p.5) “*..., the Sartrean absurd is defined as ‘That which is meaningless. Thus man’s existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification.’*” (Foley, 2008, p.5) For Camus, “*the absurd arises out of the ‘confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.’*” (Foley, 2008, p.6) But, “*the realization that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself but only a beginning.*” (Foley, 2008, p.6)” Being denied this intelligibility and certainty, according to Camus, man shall practice revolt. “*Revolt here is an acceptance of the fact of the absurd, but it is not a meek acceptance. Instead it is an acceptance filled with scorn, defiance and suffering.*” (Foley, 2008, p.10) This revolt is metaphysical in nature in that it tries to create “meaning” out of the absurdity of meaninglessness by living fully, for

the only ethic possible at this point is a quantitative ethic, since in the absence of moral values the intensity and frequency of enjoyable experience appears to be the only available determining standard with which to ascribe value to experience. (Foley, 2008, p.11)

Adrian’s positive attitude to life, his so-called seriousness, is apparently convinced by the Camusian view of revolt as against the absurdity of existence.

One more fact can further justify Adrian’s philosophical influence. While the other three cursed their parents for hindering their growth and arranging their lives for them, Adrian showed not a single sign of

dissatisfaction with his parents even though his mother had walked out on them and left the family broken. “*This ought to have given him a whole storetank of existential rage, but somehow it didn’t; he said he loved his mother and respected his father.*” (Barnes, 2011, p.9) Adrian seemingly had accepted this traumatic experience and moved on; his reading of Camus might have helped him determine a strategy to cope with this absurdity in his personal life. At this point in the novel, Barnes has stealthily imported two key words central to his fate: “existential” and “broken family.”

Adrian’s another mental trait is his logicity. When asked about his opinion on the reason of the First World War, he replied:

We want to blame an individual so that everyone else is exculpated. Or we blame a historical process as a way of exonerating individuals. ...It seems to me that there is—was—a chain of individual responsibilities, all of which were necessary, but not so long a chain that everyone can simply blame everyone else. But of course, my desire to ascribe responsibility might be more a reflection of my own cast of mind than a fair analysis of what happened. (Barnes, 2011, p.13)

Though he talked about historical responsibilities, his reasoning can be adopted to interpret his stance in life. He did not simply blame anyone for the brokenness of his family; though he admitted that the individual responsibility was not to be ignored, it was meaningless to ascribe responsibilities. To this point, it is clear that Camusian philosophy and logicity engender Adrian’s positiveness and seriousness in life.

The first suicide, when studied closely, foreshadows Adrian’s own. Even though the dead boy Robson was “vegetable matter” (Barnes, 2011, p.14), incomparable to the intelligent Adrian, they finally did the same thing. Barnes seems to suggest that suicide has nothing to do with one’s cleverness; there is some deeper reason. Adrian, well armed with a positive philosophy and the clarity of mind, eventually took his own life even though that philosophy does not view suicide as an effective way to fight the absurd. Adrian’s explanation of Robson’s death was that “*Eros and Thanatos. Thanatos wins again.*” (Barnes, 2011, p.14) This “again” betrays his mentality concerning the matter of love and death: Death is always the winner and love is always doomed. In the matter of suicide, Adrian quoted Camus: “*Camus said that suicide was the only true philosophical question....The only true one. The fundamental one on which all others depend.*” (Barnes, 2011, p.15) As Albert Camus stated in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “*There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.*” (Camus, 1983, p.3) In this book,

Camus repeatedly demonstrates his basic view: the absurdity of existence does not logically lead to the inevitability of suicide. Does it necessarily mean that one should take his life when life

is meaningless and then not worth living? Camus' answer is negative: If life is meaningless and absurd, then it is even more important to experience it in its fullness (Zhou, 1987, p.423).

In this sense,

Suicide is not, therefore, for Camus an ultimate act of hubris, but is in fact a renunciation of all human values and indeed the possibility of human values. It is not the ultimate act of human freedom, but the renunciation of human freedom. For Camus the absurd describes "a tension, born of a discrepancy between external reality and the human desire for familiarity", but this does not discount such things as the existence of beauty, friendship, health, satisfying work and creativity. While these values are contingent, a relative happiness remains possible, and "to commit suicide because of their relativity is to surrender all that is possible.... The doxa of life are a weave of beauty and ugliness, friendship and understanding, health and sickness, insight and opacity. It is a question of living with the mix and not succumbing to the temptation' to make an absolute value out of either hope or despair". (Foley, 2008, p.10)

In this light, one can see clearly that Adrian's active attitude to life in the shadow of the mother's leaving is his endeavor to get over that traumatic experience, active practice of Camusian revolt against the absurd.

In the discussion about the suicide of Robson, the four friends used an absurdly mechanical formula: "*it could only be considered philosophical in an arithmetical sense of the term: he, being about to cause an increase of one in the human population, had decided it was his ethical duty to keep the planet's numbers constant.*" (Barnes, 2011, p.15) Barnes ironically highlights the naivety of interpreting life with the so-called clarity of logic. Adrian and his pals, when being confronted with the mystery of life, would turn to the robustness and safety of arithmetic for explanation. What is even more ironic as well as tragic is that Adrian also used this seemingly flawless logicity to argue himself toward his own death. In the fragment of his diary Tony happened to set eyes on, when trying to figure out the chain of responsibility leading to his quasi-incest with Sarah Ford, he worked out two equations: " $b=s-v+a^j$ " and " $a^2 + V + a^l \times s = b$ " (Barnes, 2011, p.94) to explain the chain of responsibility. (Please note the similarity between the textual arrangement of Adrian's diary and that of Wittgenstein's "*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*".) These evidences unerringly suggest that for certainty and seriousness in life Adrian not only became a Camusian but also a logician.

Then, what could push him to the final suicidal decision? A detail easily ignored by the reader is the suicidal note of Robson. It read "*Sorry, Mum.*" (Barnes, 2011, p.15) As for the truth of his death there would not be any accessible; just as the exchange between Adrian and Old Joe Hunt revealed, even if Robson were able to testify to his own death, his testimony would be treated with skepticism. (Barnes, 2011, p.20) Hunt also stressed that "*mental states may often be inferred from actions.*" (Barnes, 2011, p.20) Robson did not mention his father in that note; he might either be estranged from the father

or not have a father in the scene for unknown reasons. When this absence of Father, a sure sign of a broken family, is put against the whole novel, a crucial theme of Barnes emerges. Adrian was from a secretive broken family, secretive in that he always avoided answering why his mother left (Barnes, 2011, pp.16-7), never invited his friends to his home (Barnes, 2011, p.58), and his funeral was exclusively attended by his family (Barnes, 2011, p.54). His life, though he had tried to live it seriously, positively and logically, remained a mystery, defying any curious inquiries. Mrs. Ford apparently got stuck in an unhappy marriage; she finally got happily out of it after the death of her husband. Veronica presumably never got married. Tony's wife divorced him for another guy who in turn left her for a younger woman. Life depicted here was full of brokenness, which forms one of the essential motifs of this book. Adrian and Robson, though much different, probably both came from broken families, and their deaths were both involved with adultery and pregnancy. Considering Adrian's application of the Freudian terms of Eros and Thanatos to unravel the death of Robson, it is logical to infer that his love affair with Sarah Ford could be explained in the vein of Freudian psychoanalysis. Adrian, this man of robust principles, illogically fell in love with the mother of his girlfriend when this girlfriend's ex-boyfriend warned him against the girl and suggested him to turn to the mother for affirmation. Where were his principles and why they failed? Why a man of principles could be so easily persuaded to follow one of his friends' instructions who had never shown any superiority in intelligence? The only possible explanation is that Adrian, because of his traumatic family experience, had no grasp on the matter of family and love. What he saw in Mrs. Ford was not a mature and seductive woman, but a mother, a substitute for the mother he had been missing all the years. As was testified by Mrs. Ford in her last letter to Tony, the last few months of Adrian's life were happy, which implicitly suggests that his trauma was temporarily assuaged by the motherly love of Sarah Ford. Only when the baby was expected did he wake up from this delirious dream and wanted to get back into his logical tracks. He then ironically followed the logical they worked out for Robson: when one caused an increase in the population, one shall responsibly kill oneself to maintain the equilibrium. As a follower of Camus, he should be clear about Camus' objection to suicide as a means to annihilate absurdity. But he did commit suicide! His son with Sarah Ford turned out to be an imbecile. Given Sarah's age, it is highly possible. Then there could be another metaphorical interpretation which suggests that the love affair is incestuous in nature. ("Incest" is a beloved theme in the contemporary British fiction; for instance, Ian McEwan's *Cement Garden* depicts brother-sister incest.) This arrangement is cruel but illuminating in that Barnes tries to convey the message

that the mysteriousness of life could never be reduced to clarity and legibility through the practice of philosophical optimism and logical reasoning. When he said that he missed God, he was lamenting the absence of faith which could rise us up above the unintelligibility of life. The suicide of Adrian, and that of Robson for that matter, is a tragedy in the sense that the human, when seeking weapons to fight absurdity in life, has turn to the false "gods"; even if we do not believe God, the absence of God is too much unbearable when we are confronted with traumatic experience and the mortality of this life.

2. THE DEATH OF MRS. FORD AND ITS REPERCUSSION: THE MYSTERY OF LIFE

Among all the deaths in *The Sense of an Ending*, Mrs. Ford's is the only natural one in the sense that she presumably died of senility. Her death per se is not comparable to Adrian's and even Robson's in the pathos it could arouse. However, the mystery of her life and the aftereffect of her death are central to the meaning construction of this novel. In this context, the word "unrest" stands out as *the* keyword of this novel. Barnes seemingly insouciantly introduced this word into the text as a stupid answer from Marshall the cautious know-nothing (Barnes, 2011, p.2), but he emphatically ended the novel with the word to highlight his understanding of the age, an age of great unrest. Barnes thus does not stop at examining the tragic impact of the absence of faith on individuals; he, like his contemporaries such as Ian McEwan who in the past 15 years began to cast his eyes on a broader socio-historical scenario in his literary practice, tried to locate the socio-historical reasons of human behavior and tragedies.

Mrs. Ford's death not only opens a window to the unknowns of Adrian's death, but also sets in motion a train of events leading to Tony's drastically reversed self-evaluation. In this sense, her death is not the end of *her* story, but the beginning of the construction of the meaning of the *overall* story. According to Margaret, Tony's ex-wife, Mrs. Ford is a woman of mystery, so is her daughter Veronica, at least in Tony's blunt perception. Admittedly, these two women are full of illegibility, the effect of which has been intended by the author for the reader to provoke in-depth contemplations on their mysteriousness.

Tony had always been baffled by the actions of the mother and the daughter. Theirs had been a queer and lopsided relationship, where her tastes in music and literature, as well as her background, were all superior to Tony's. On the other hand, Tony, as long as a girl accepted him, would like to oblige whenever Veronica showed her preference. The latent doubt is that why she condescended to love someone she felt superior to. Tony's relating is only half believable as revealed by the

whole book; though, Veronica's arrogance is virtually irrefutable considering all her behaviors. She left Tony in the backseat; clung to her father and brother, leaving Tony behind with an apparent lie; openly asked her brother if Tony would be OK as a boy friend with Tony present. These counter-evidences of her claimed affection to Tony could only be explained by Tony's damage theory. Tony, though as blunt as depicted, is not at all clueless. He through his intensively frustrating experiences with Veronica acquired the feel that there might be damage behind her persona. His speculation was that there could have been indecency in her father's and brother's behavior to her in her childhood which had warped her mentality to extreme protectiveness and skepticism. Her refusal to have full sex with Tony even though she had strong and healthy sexual desire confirmed by the masturbating game they performed is a clear sign that she despised herself in the matter of sex. She was not ready to let Tony enter her and her true self, afraid of exposing the real self to a man she was serious about but could not afford to give herself completely to in case he be solely interested in sex, not her as a person. This explains why she was serious about the future of their relationship and while sensing Tony was drifting away she let Tony to have the full sex he had been denied all along in order to assure him of her love for him. When after the sex he nonetheless broke up with her she was furious to accuse him of rape, a seemingly absurd charge considering her consent but an enlightening action as to her feeling of being used and violated, again. Tony is a rapist in the sense that he had been all along after nothing but sex; in this sense he violated Veronica and her serious intention for the relationship even though her intention was contradicted and ill-conveyed by her own actions rendered impenetrable by her supposed damage in her early years.

Tony's sole consolation in that nightmarish weekend came from Mrs. Ford. In the first morning, when Tony went downstairs for breakfast, in the absence of the other three family members, he sensed that there was "unrest" in the behavior of Mrs. Ford who acted in a "slapdash way" resulting in the broken of the yoke of an egg and the famous throwing the hot frying-pan into the wet sink to create the steaming "great unrest". Barnes successfully created with all the details of a house wife desperate for love which she had been denied. With the crude husband and the hypocritical son who sarcastically referred to her as "the Mother", as well as the attachment of the daughter to the other two out of inexplicable reasons, she was virtually an isolated island in that family. The artistic disposition sensed by Tony was suppressed by the aura of the family even though Veronica partly inherited this from her. She was so discontented that she went so far as to warn Tony that "Don't let Veronica get away with too much." (Barnes, 2011, p.31) This outrageous and preposterous remark betraying one's daughter in front of her boyfriend the first time he was introduced to

her family betrayed her mentality instead. When asked by Tony what this meant, she acted as if she had never uttered such a thing, showing that she realized her blunder of losing control over her desperation and therefore tried to cover it up with insouciance. The spontaneity of the remark opens a crack to her mentality and self-evaluation in the family. The reason of animosity toward Veronica might be that Mrs. Ford felt belittled by the rest of the family while Veronica stood in the center of attention perhaps for her damage. Because of the unspoken damage Veronica had been indulged by the father and the brother and felt unduly attached to them, leaving the mother feeling outside and neglected; hence her rivalry with her every time she brought a boyfriend home.

Another reason Barnes did not provide explicitly for Mrs. Ford's unrest may be more social and historical. As David Christopher observes,

During the Second World War (1939–1945) many women had gone to work in the fields and factories, but afterwards they were encouraged to return to their domestic roles as wives and mothers. The birth rate rose sharply and large families became fashionable. But at the same time there were indications of domestic unhappiness. Divorces quadrupled from 8,000 per year pre-war to 32,000 in 1950, and continued to rise. More and more women began seeking the services of psychiatrists and marriage guidance counselors. Many wanted to return to work and by 1957 one third of married women were in employment, even though the majority of jobs open to women were low-paid, part-time and monotonous. (Christopher, 1999, p.3)

Mrs. Ford was not content to be merely a wife and mother; she hated to miss the freedom promised by the new era for women. In the popular culture of the 1960's, there was "*a 'third way' for women which was neither submissive nor whore-like. They were shown as fun-loving girls who were independent, sexually confident and happy.*" (Christopher, 1999, p.3) This tendency to female emancipation was perfectly epitomized by the farewell scene where "*Mrs. Ford was leaning against the porch, sunlight falling on a wisteria climbing the house above her head.*" (Barnes, 2011, p.32) This picture is symbolic in that it looks more like a young girl seeing off her lover than a mother her daughter's. This illusion is intensified by the next detail: "*I waved goodbye, and she responded, though not the way people normally do, with a raised palm, but with a sort of horizontal gesture at waist level.*" (Barnes, 2011, p.32) This specific gesture reinforces the "young girl" illusion, resulting in a vivid image of a middle-age woman trapped in a desperate marriage pining for the romantic love and freedom she had been denied. When this image is viewed together with the suicides of Adrian and Robson, one can not fail to discern the crisis in the British society in the form of shattered family life which, according to Barnes who is obsessed with the effects of unhappy family life, shall be the source of the kind of tragedies depicted in this novel. In this sense, this novel is not as some critics asserted centering on personal tragedy, memory, and

awaking; it connotes a richer layer of social and historical significance.

After this uneventfully eventful weekend, Mrs. Ford retired to invisibility, her voice only heard through two letters, event though her impact was constantly present throughout the rest of the book. Her "absurdity" refused to relent when she, after knowing the breakup of Veronica and Tony, wrote to the latter, not accusing him of the indecency of abandoning the former after having got the sex, but apologizing for the harm her family inflicted on that weekend. The fastidiousness of her apology could only be understood as the chasm between her and the rest of her family. "*Class*" is the word Tony used to explain the arrogance of the family, and it is indeed the word which segregates different strata of the English society. The arrogance of the higher middle class embodied by the father's super sniper, his exaggerated attitude toward the sensitive Tony, his rude joke about the checking of silverware, and the absence of Brother Jack at the farewell altogether must have been so much loathed by the mother that she chose to stand on the side of a stranger she met just once; and for the rudeness of her family she felt so guilty that she could not lift it off her conscience for the rest of her life. Her empathy with Tony could only be explained reasonably by the speculation that she was once a member of Tony's class. In this way Barnes has built richer meaning into his seemingly highly personal novel, reflecting the structural change in the society and its consequences for the individual.

The second letter composed before her death was explosive in that she used her impending death as a chance to provoke the quest for the truth of Adrian's death. It tumbled Tony's complacency and self-deceit into a maelstrom, promoting a gradual self-recognition and guiding him to the final realization of his despicable role in the death of Adrian and the other related tragedies. Michael Wood, when commenting on a new trend in the British fiction, insightfully remarks:

They have made an appalling mistake, in glee, in anguish, in innocence or heartlessness; convinced that there was no mistake, but only liberation or a form of fidelity. Years later, when the disasters have spoken, when murder or madness or suicide or incest or the withering of love has declared itself, the survivors face their half-focused regrets, reaching no conclusion. This story, in various versions, recurs so often in recent British fiction that it begins to look like a major contemporary myth: forgive us, for we know not what we have done. (Wood, 1994, p.966)

Tony when first exposed to the suicide of Adrian acted as if it had nothing to do with him, he himself an onlooker and outsider looking at someone else's death. This nonchalance is the result of Tony's having been hurt by Adrian's betrayal of their friendship by going out with his ex-girlfriend who supposedly had held herself sexually aloof because of his unworthiness as a member from a lower social class. This sense of being down-trodden simmered to the point where it burst out as that malicious

denouncing letter which disturbed the balance of Adrian's mind and turned him finally to the ready embrace of the mother desperately looking for a chance to break the shackle of her family. What is essential to this train of events is the hurt Tony felt so deeply that he could not help striking back. One certainly can not wholly put this tragedy down to class discrimination, but the prejudice and the established gulf between different classes do play a role to shape the mentalities whose "co-operation" eventually spelt disaster for the involved parties. Ian McEwan in his *Atonement* ascribes the tragic event partly to the "pride and prejudice" of a higher social class held for a lower one. Apparently, Barnes is not alone in this perception and expression of the destructive force of the established social class system. Tony is to be blamed as a person with character flaws, but his victim mentality is not forged by himself alone; it is more a social product. Mrs. Ford's second letter and her death is not only conducive to a renewed self-evaluation of Tony, but also to the reader's reexamination of the social legacies which have shaped and been shaping collective and individual mentalities. In this sense, her death as well as those of Adrian and Robson's are death unto being, encouraging reflections on the various forces in life so as to live a life less damaged and less damaging.

In the second letter Mrs. Ford wrote:

Dear Tony, I think it right you should have the attached. Adrian always spoke warmly of you, and perhaps you will find it an interesting, if painful, memento of long ago. I am also leaving you a little money. You may find this strange, and to tell the truth I am not quite sure of my own motives. In any case, I am sorry for the way my family treated you all those years ago, and wish you well, even from beyond the grave. Yours, Sarah Ford. P.S. It may sound odd, but I think the last months of his life were happy. (Barnes, 2011, pp.71-2)

What is not readily explicable is not the leaving of Adrian's diary to Tony, for Mrs. Ford really wanted him to know the truth, but the 500 pounds which she claimed that she didn't know why to give him. This money is nothing in monetary sense; it is nonsensical if it was viewed as a compensation for the damage her family had inflicted on Tony some 40 years ago. The only reasonable explanation for her relentless memory of her family's mistreatment of Tony, a slight matter indeed, is that she had suffered the same as Tony. With her incessant guilt and the 500 pounds, she negated the values held by her family and the class her family belonged to. She therefore sought any chance to break off from that family and the values it represented. This is the reason why she wanted to compete with her daughter for lovers and guiltlessly grabbed Adrian from Veronica with audacity and flagrancy, reveling in the happiness and courageously confronting the calamity of the suicide of Adrian and a retarded son. The death of Mr. Ford some three years after his wife's affair supposedly because of his heavy drinking problem but actually his frustration

and shame meant nothing else than freedom for Mrs. Ford. She sold the house and moved to London, starting smoking and supporting herself by taking in lodgers. She became an independent woman with her own value. The 500 pounds is a symbol of her freedom and dignity as someone with her own peculiar individuality. As Barnes mentioned many times admiringly in *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, to die "in character" is a noble thing. She died in character. But Barnes did not forget to implant an irony in the context: Mrs. Ford in her pursuit of emancipation is also destructive; her 500 pounds and consideration for Tony are ironical in that Tony was one of the culprits of Adrian's death. The dark fact may be that she did not love Adrian as a person but as a chance of escape. This may be why she kept feeling the "hurt" of Tony and rewarded him for his having introduced the opportunity of changing into her stagnant life. Her death in this sense is not as some critic claimed to be the impetus for Tony to rethink himself and understand how to live, but a chance for the reader to understand the darkness of the mystery of life. With this darkness and other darkneses in this novel, Barnes calls our attention again back to his "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him" (Barnes, 2008, p.1).

CONCLUSION

The Sense of an Ending by Julian Barnes seems to question the authenticity of memory and the ethics of memory, but what is more crucial is the underlying endeavor to project the tragic happenings in the book onto a more social and historical background while keeping the conflicts of individual characters in focus. Well-known as a postmodernist writer, though he always refuses this classification, Barnes has kept contemplating the nature of history and truth in his works. For him, the established truth, be it personal or historic, shall be reexamined because they are mostly constructions and discourses. This habitual line of writing is interestingly superseded by a latent effort to unearth the personal as well socio-historical grounds, which suggest a new development in his understanding of the mystery of life. As he himself approaches the end of life, his understanding of the role death plays in one's comprehension of life is deepened, which is duly represented in this new novel. The two suicides and the death of Mrs. Ford raise above all the narration as well as all those self-pitying and self-examining monologues of Tony, asserting themselves as the central events of the novel with significant meanings not only for the characters but for the reader. In this book, death is not merely the end of the individual life, but a starting point for people to construct their sense of life and make sense of the mysteries in life. Maybe in this sense it is a reminder of the human existence as "*being unto death.*"

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